



Hitler's Wehrmacht, 1935–1945 by Rolf-Dieter Müller.

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In this succinct overview, eminent military historian Rolf-Dieter Müller¹ attempts to tell the history of the Third Reich's armed forces (*Heer*, *Kriegsmarine*, and *Luftwaffe*) from their reorganization in 1935 to their utter defeat in 1945. While this impeccably researched study is fully conversant with emerging historiographical and interpretive debates, its author's choice of an encyclopedic rather than narrative or deeply interpretive style of presentation makes for a dry and rather superficial account.

A short introduction covers the usual classification issues in Wehrmacht history, focusing on continuity and discontinuity within German military history. Did the Wehrmacht's extraordinary decade of extreme violence, including its willing, even enthusiastic, role in grievous war crimes constitute a fundamental break with its past? Or was it the culmination of three hundred years of German military history, as many argued in the immediate aftermath of the war? Such questions were complicated by the inability of the *Bundesrepublik* (West Germany) to fully and formally repudiate the Wehrmacht as it did other National Socialist institutions. Moreover, Müller writes, "victorious [Western] countries did not view the Wehrmacht as one of the unlawful institutions of the Nazi regime; rather, they respected and even admired it because of its professional ability and successes" (2). By contrast, the *Deutsche Demokratische Republik* (East Germany), modeled on the USSR, and part of the Soviet bloc, took a far more critical view of the Wehrmacht precisely to make a revolutionary break from the German military past and please its Soviet masters.

The debate revived in 1985, when West German *Bundespräsident* Richard von Weizsäcker, himself a veteran of the war, denounced the Wehrmacht as an instrument of waging illegal war and triggered a scholarly reevaluation setting the Wehrmacht within a wider and longer tradition. Most notably, this has included a reconsideration of the notion of a *Vernichtungskrieg* (war of annihilation) with respect to anti-partisan warfare, moral accountability of commanders, and the "ensnarement" and responsibility of ordinary soldiers. Instead of addressing such matters front and center, Müller concentrates on arid statistical analysis and details of organizational relationships that add little explanatory power. Most of this information is, on the one hand, familiar to specialist readers and will, on the other, bore general readers into indifference.

Chapter 1, "The Military in the Totalitarian Führer State," details the purge of the SA (*Sturmabteilung*), the Saarland referendum, the reintroduction of conscription, and the revamp of the officer corps and top level of command. Müller also discusses "military pastoring" as part of the Nazification of the churches and army. Longer sections concern changes to the military penal code that allowed war crimes to go unprosecuted and unpunished, and efforts to make soldiers into National Socialists and vice-versa (31–37). That leads naturally to discussion of the *Waffen SS*.

1. For many years Director of the German Armed Forces Center for Military History in Potsdam, Müller was one of the lead researchers for the monumental *Das Deutsche Reich und der Zweite Weltkrieg*, 13 vols. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1979–2008).

Chapter 2, systematically outlining “The Regime’s Armed Forces,” adds nothing new to existing scholarship on the subject. Thus, we read about divisional structures and the late-war establishment of phantom divisions; *Luftwaffe* field divisions; and Panzer divisions. Also discussed are special operations units, from parachutists to combat engineers, and various infantry and other weapons, from anti-tank cannon to artillery. Müller then touches on operational concepts and training before reverting to his favorite topic—organization and command structure—in a section replete with charts for all three services. He closes with foreign volunteers and allies, women in the Wehrmacht, and casualty estimates.

Chapter 3, “Training and Front Experience,” concerns training courses for soldiers and officers and their time in combat, all in the context of the Wehrmacht’s evolution from an elite force into a conscript mass army. Müller considers the decline of German fighting capability by 1944 and concomitant improvement in the Red Army’s abilities (104). The compressed analysis here may please specialists, but will put off general readers.

Chapter 4, “The Wehrmacht and the *Volksgemeinschaft*,” centers on the concept of racial community. It offers a methodical, strictly unemotional account of the Army’s brutal mistreatment of prisoners, terrorists, and resisters inspired by crude Nazi race theories and extermination policies. Some will find the author’s dispassionate tone wanting.

Chapter 5, gives an (unsurprisingly) dense account of the “War of the Factories,” stressing the ineptitude that delayed Germany’s shift to a military command economy till 1942 and—more than failings of command structure, training regimens, or operational doctrine—ultimately ensured the Allied powers’ victory in the attritional war against Germany. That “Hitler never had any real chance of winning the war of the factories” (124), even before the critical operational turning point in December 1941, strengthened his and the German military’s “resolve to achieve a quick and decisive end to the war and to acquire through conquest any armaments he needed that were too difficult to obtain in his own country” (125).

Chapter 6 has little that is new to say about “Total War and The War of Annihilation,” although it does neatly summarize the thoughts of a leading military historian on these critically important issues. Müller emphatically assigns criminal blame to the German High Command and the Wehrmacht, while noting also the culpability of officers who shirked their responsibilities to both POWs and civilians (143–44). Overall, like other historians, he portrays a German military whose minimal resistance to criminal orders progressively entangled it in the worst criminal acts of the Third Reich. In the process, he quashes the postwar myth of the “clean Wehrmacht” so favored by German generals and veterans.

Chapter 7 offers a terse overview of “The Wehrmacht and Operations,” with obligatory sections on Poland in 1939 and the Western campaign of 1940. The Battle of Britain gets a single page, Yugoslavia and the North African campaigns two more. Crete unaccountably gets more coverage and the sole map of any of the four campaigns. The narrative then moves into the Soviet Union to track the Panzers. Even Barbarossa gets just five pages. Naval warfare and the entire bombing war merit only another four.

An epilogue assesses the “Difficult Legacy” of a Wehrmacht “demonized from an ideological standpoint,” but praised for “its training methods and abilities” (201). Müller observes that the self-serving lies of German generals in the memoir literature “began to totter only gradually” (203). Real change of attitudes started only inside the Federal Republic in the 1970s and culminated after military unification in 1995.